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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses what makes an excellent secondary school teacher, what training should occur for potential secondary school teachers to enable classroom excellence, what characteristics define such excellence, and whether excellence is learned or is the product of a particular predisposition, or both. It begins by explaining how excellent teachers pass through several stages, then discusses excellent teachers' compulsion to teach and their passion for education. The paper describes teacher demand versus teacher excellence, the preparation of people to be excellent teachers, and teacher character and professional ethics. Finally, it looks at a framework that considers the pursuit of teacher excellence. The framework includes several components (mentoring and supervision, classroom management, interpersonal relationships, personal portfolio and introspective reflection, effective issue-oriented discipline strategies, and continued professional development). (Contains 25 references.) (SM)

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Taking it to the Next Level: Components of Excellent Secondary Educators

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2003

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"Taking It to the Next Level: Components of Excellent Secondary Educators"

By Ernest J. Zarra, III, Ph. D.

What makes an excellent secondary teacher? What training should occur for potential secondary teachers to enable classroom excellence? What characteristics define such excellence? Is excellence learned or is it the product of a particular predisposition, or both? The above questions address the essence of any discussion pertinent to teacher excellence. Since teachers drive secondary schools, improving teacher quality results in improvements for secondary schools, student education, and overall community spirit (Berends 2000). Discovering and defining teacher excellence can be life-changing and impacting to an entire school community.

Stages of Excellence

There are certain observable particulars to which excellent secondary teachers attribute their successes (Steffy & Wolfe 2001). These particulars are found in what this author terms "stages of excellence"? This is not to suggest that the stages, themselves, are "excellent." Rather, "stages of excellence" comprise the process of "perfecting," or "maturing" of teachers "unto excellence."

It is not the intention of this author to determine whether there exist levels of teacher excellence. The concern is also not about the shades or grades of excellence. However, based on a general assumption that schools do not make or break excellent teachers, the following assertion is made. *Wherever excellent teachers are found, excellence finds a way to make itself known.* Regardless of the school, neighborhoods, or community demographics, teacher excellence finds ways of being noticed.

All excellent teachers pass through several stages. This does not suggest that a series of stages is formulaic, so that anyone who passes through them becomes an excellent teacher. Certainly, those who have spent any time at all in secondary classrooms understand that excellence is developed in addition to and outside of the fulfillment of teacher education programs and state certifications. After all, if excellence were required just to get into the teaching profession, how many of us initially would have been without jobs? Discussions of teacher excellence are vastly different from those pertaining to "teacher qualifications" and are outside the parameters of this paper.

Excellent secondary teachers seem to possess certain characteristics, distinct of those found in good or poor teachers. Ask any student, parent, counselor, or administrator on a high school campus, or college campus, "who" the excellent teachers or professors are, and a few names will quickly come to their minds. It seems excellence, like its opposite, is easier to identify by characteristics, but much more difficult to define and to understand. Thus, we mean to imply here that there is a "second-nature" aspect to excellence, adding to the debate as to whether excellent teachers are born, are made, or both.

Education is one of the few professions where people of all ages, backgrounds, genders, ideologies, methods, nationalities, religions, and moralities are mixed together

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settings, the preparation of extensive lesson plans (which are often the more irrelevant of activities for those in training), and a host of other pre-professional prerequisites.

Most teacher training schools are probably not concerned about questions of high levels of specialized training and the pursuit of excellence. There are no "real" stringent examinations to have to pass to join an elite group (unless one considers the recent rise in national certification). The fact is, schools need teachers and colleges need students to fill their teacher preparation programs. Students are admitted to credential programs in large numbers to help offset the need in today's public high schools. When was the last time you heard of a school of education undertaking a serious select admissions process, or selection interviews, to keep the numbers low and competition high? One must question whether any profession could maintain excellence with demand superseding excellence? What other profession would tolerate admission of most any student because demand greatly exceeded supply?

Chosen Ones?

The determination of whether a profession has chosen a person, at first, sounds quite mystical. However, the notion is not quite that sophisticated, or ethereal. It does imply a certain compulsion, a "calling," if you will (Fullan 1993). This compulsion is found in the comments of excellent secondary teachers. They state that they would be "highly dissatisfied" doing anything other that teaching. Their driven state is more than habit. It seems they are compelled to teach, and this compulsion is found early on.

Excellent teachers bring marvelous things to secondary classrooms. However, if one were to focus more on the routines of education, a set of holiday vacations, personal benefits, or any other similar elements, he or she would fall short of excellence. Hating Mondays, counting Fridays, etc., are sometimes part of teacher prattle. However, when extremely negative teacher dispositions, or constant sarcasm shape the profession, the results are detrimental to pursuits of educational excellence. Excellent teachers express quite clearly, that "teaching is in their blood." Teaching is both an extension and outlet for ***who they are***. It comprises the sum of their professional existence. Focusing on what they do is the same as focusing on who they are. It is not just about a job.

Passion

There is another certainty among excellent teachers. They do not merely "enjoy" their work. Excellent teachers see education as ***so much more than work*** (word-play intended). They have a deep-seated urge to see their students succeed, both in the classroom and out in the real world. Teaching helps to satisfy this urge, but is never completely satisfied by classroom activity only. This deep-seated urge is the offspring of "passion." Fullan (1993) refers to this concept as "moral purpose" (p. 10), whereas Sirotnik (1990) addresses it by the phrase "moral requirements" (p. 298).

Passion is a distinguishing mark of excellent secondary teachers. This passion is not limited to content, or in-class enthusiasm. It extends beyond content into love for students, daily congenial and personal interaction, accompanied by a positive disposition, enjoyment of challenges presented, and dedication to betterment of all students (Fullan 1993). Passion is what keeps a teacher in his room during lunch to chat with students about life. It is what drives a teacher to share personal accounts of life's difficulties with her classes. Passion also is found in after school tutoring, clubs, coaching, and online

and expected to succeed. A school with good teachers is known as a good school. Communities like good schools, but all parents would rather their children attend "excellent schools." In excellent schools, excellence is the goal for teachers, programs, administrators, etc. Excellence implies going beyond the norm, or the good—in essence, to excel, toward that which is better. Excellent schools have teachers who excel at many things and who do not detract from this excellence by extremes, or by negative practices. For example, **School A** has an excellent teacher (**T**), who is knowledgeable in her content area. She has established rapport with her students, colleagues, parents, and the community. She is a personable and outgoing. **T** exhibits qualities of compassion, commitment, and cares for her students. However, **T** has a very short fuse and blows her stack every so often, sometimes adding profanities to her speech.

Generally, **T** would probably not meet the criteria to be considered an excellent teacher. Her "predictable" flaw would detract from an overall, consistent and positive impact as a person. Certainly, **T** would be labeled a very good teacher who exhibits traits and actions of excellence. Yet, she does not have a handle on one of the very important elements of excellence: Personal behavioral excellence (Ryan and Bohlin 1999).

Doing excellent things does not necessarily equate to professional or personal excellence. However, excellence does make room for those of us who are tripped up from time to time by our own humanity. Excellent teachers are those who are quick to forgive because they have needed forgiveness and understanding themselves. Excellent teachers are more than what they do. Excellence is not definable by the separation of the person who is the teacher and the actions and roles taken by the teacher. Rather, excellent teachers are defined by the oneness of their professional and personal excellence, demonstrated by their overcoming of that which could detract from their pursuit, if unchecked.

Demand Versus Excellence

When we think of meeting needs with excellence, we often think of professions other than secondary teaching. For example, all people want their physicians to practice excellence. Many athletic coaches and parents constantly press for competitive excellence. Some colleges and universities are highly competitive and settle only for excellence in their admission of students, while others limit excellence by utilizing somewhat controversial practices. Such competitive excellence turns out to be downplayed, in terms of demand for teachers at the secondary level.

When it comes to teachers, and teacher education programs, large numbers are admitted because of need. Schools of education are university's "cash cows." The fact is that teachers make up 4% of the overall work force in the United States (Ingersoll 2001). The demand is great for teachers. The demand is also great for doctors, lawyers, and nurses, as well as a host of other professions. However, there are more than twice the number of K-12 teachers as there are nurses, and at least five times the amount of teachers to lawyers or professors (Ingersoll 2001). Cash cows that do not produce educational milk amount to little more than bull.

In order to meet the need as quickly as possible, without serious consideration for excellence, states have restructured some of their credential requirements. Universities and colleges follow prescribed models, or systems for teacher training. These models contain theory, some practical application of the material within the university classroom

through e-mail lessons and communications when students and parents have concerns after hours. Passion leaves lasting impressions on students and drives the excellent teacher forward—even into the weekends and vacations out and about in the community.

Teacher Preparation

The issue of secondary teacher excellence lies less in the preparation for the profession and more in the preparation of the person. The latter is neglected in many schools of education today, in favor of the production of "qualified" teachers. Colleges and universities do not focus their programs on the "person-teacher." They emphasize training the "teacher-person." Prerequisites to teacher excellence are found in the completion of several educational and personal growth stages. These include: (1) *qualitative secondary education instruction*, (2) *professional training*, (3) *collegial mentoring*, and (4) *personal reflection and application* (Martorella 2001). In order to be genuinely successful, each of these cannot be disconnected to the personhood of the teacher.

Most schools of education certainly do their best to meet state requirements in the teacher preparation programs. Most schools try to go beyond what is expected by their state, as they increase the rigors of training. However, what is echoed by many classroom veterans is that, after they have settled into their jobs, what they learned in college turned out to be mostly *"irrelevant and inapplicable"* to them in the real world, professionally. Essentially, what the majority is saying is that they *"did not receive adequate training"* for their jobs, which raises another question. Do the faculty in schools of education have recent knowledge of occurrences in the schools, or classrooms? Professors hired from out-of-town, or out of state, or that are not state-credentialed teachers—or have never stepped foot in the classroom—cannot expect that excellence will emerge from their lecture-oriented classes. This does not speak well for schools of education. One of the major criticisms that heard personally from teachers at conferences across the nation is that professors and schools of education do not approach education from a practical vantage point.

Excellent teachers have, at one time or another, come across one or more particular instructors who have literally "fanned the flames" of their educational passion. They are quick to credit their mentors. Rather than "burning out in the classroom," excellent teachers act as educational incendiaries to their students, their families, and education colleagues—both in the classroom and out (Darling-Hammond 2001; Acheson and Gall 1992; and Coles 1997).

Excellent teachers have been trained adequately in their content areas and have found the extra time to make it through the assessments. They somehow find a way to use life's circumstances and challenges to their advantage. As one teacher put it, "I know my life's lessons somehow will help my students." Excellent teachers allow their passion to shape them in their profession.

Personal Character and Professional Ethics

The reality is that students analyze their teachers. Analyses by students take on various forms. Some are overt and stated. Others occur at home, at lunch, or other informal settings. Excellent secondary educators welcome most student challenges. However, a form of challenge not welcome by teachers involves their integrity and

reputation. One teacher remarked recently, "It hurts when students question by credibility and integrity." Why is this the case? Is the teacher's feelings hurt, her reputation sullied, or both? Too often secondary teachers develop two distinct characters: One in the classroom and one outside the classroom. Students see this compartmentalization and definitely talk about it outside of class. In fact, some are brazen enough to use any teacher lifestyle discrepancies to their advantage against the teacher, even while in class.

As an example, teachers who use profanity in the classroom, on the athletic field, or while at the store, are taking a lower path and can expect little more from their students. The effects of such practice can result in student's tolerance levels of profanity increasing, and even an increase of student use of profanity in the classroom, or on the field. This type of behavior, if practiced regularly, detracts from the pursuit of excellence in schools. Teachers who do excellent academic things in the classroom, yet care not about their regular displays of character flaws—which equates to the delivery system for a teacher—cannot and should not be considered among the excellent. We must remember that less than excellent teachers sometimes accomplish excellent things. Could it be that personal consideration of one's legacy early on in a teaching career could very well help to clarify the distinctions between "goodness" and "excellence?"

Whenever professionals begin to speak to the issue of lifestyle outside the classroom, a large segment of teachers cry "foul." Excellent teachers realize that their "job" does not end when they hit the parking lot at the end of each day. By contrast, it appears that a larger segment of the teaching ranks have bought into the notion that it is possible to live compartmentalized lives with no detriment to students or themselves. Such notions are even supported through union protections. As one male colleague put it, "It can only hurt if I am caught." Excellent teachers find it difficult to support this type of reasoning. Most teachers probably do not tolerate students using similar reasoning in their classes. We all must come to understand it is difficult to assist students in their own character development when we, as teachers, act unconcerned about the corporate effects of our own characters (Kessler 2000).

Teachers who do not aspire to excellence in their character and ethics at school—and in public—cannot legitimately criticize students for similar practice. Such criticism plays into the hands of those who would label teachers as "hypocrites." In the classroom, for example, should a student be sent to the office for committing an offense that is akin to what the teacher committed within the same class just yesterday? Holding students accountable for their behaviors is made more difficult when teachers are behaving similarly on the job, or outside of work. Students watch for consistency and tend to forgive the occasional compartmentalization, in terms of their teachers. Students, by nature, want to compartmentalize, but hold teachers to higher standards. As was stated earlier, students analyze their teachers. At the coffee shop, the teacher is still the teacher, whether he feels like it, or not.

Let it be clear that no one is arguing for perfection for teachers. This is not possible—ever! What the challenge amounts to is for seeds of excellence to germinate, take hold, and then mature. This emergence begins to spread and, over time, eventually chokes out some undesirable teacher weaknesses. Excellence allows for errors in judgment and entices forgiveness by students and colleagues—not judgmentalism. Overall, excellent teachers expect more from their students, while personally and actively

modeling these expectations (Kagan 2001). Students and teachers win when both grow toward and into excellence. Excellent teachers have a better chance of producing excellent students.

A Framework Toward Excellence

Besides the issues addressed earlier, a framework that considers the pursuit of teacher excellence focuses on several components, which include: Mentoring and supervision, classroom management, Interpersonal relationships which colleagues, personal portfolio and introspective reflection, effective issue-oriented discipline strategies, as well as continued professional development.

An excellent teacher remains active in the profession well after tenure. One of the ways teachers can stay vibrant and relevant to their students' lives is to develop "community" (Putnam 2000). Community here is used with the idea that teachers demonstrate genuine professional and personal "actions" that affect both inside and outside the classroom. Community takes several years to develop (Putnam 2000). Seldom will newer teachers have even the time to begin this process. More often than not, teachers who are successful in developing a sense of community will have spent many years at one particular school—possibly where their own children attended. Community building takes time. Time is the essence of relationships and relationships are the essence of genuine and authentic community (Langer 2000). The tenured teacher is freed up to make significant contributions to the school and community-at-large.

In a more practical sense, community pertains to what a teacher does while not actually performing duties related to instruction. For example, an on-campus teacher can develop community by becoming an advisor for a student-run club. He or she could also get involved in coaching, if there was a desire and the time. Another way to establish community is to actively bridge a connection between a student's family and the student. Too often, high school connections to home occur through the dean's office, the principal, or campus security. Teachers can request and schedule parents to come to class one day to share for a few minutes. Excellent teachers find a way to "plug in" to families and students beyond the classroom.

If a teacher is out in the community, she should make a point to frequent locations where she can greet parents and students. Too many teachers and students refrain from conversation away from the classroom. However, informal meetings like these go a long way in making the instructional part of the job more productive. In addition, community occurs when a teacher volunteers to speak at one of the student's churches, youth functions, or is in attendance at more personalized functions, such as weddings, or funerals. In addition, teachers can go to athletic events as fans and sit with the parents and students. Students enjoy knowing that their teachers are "real" and show concern for them outside of school.

The following seem to work effectively toward community building: (1) Send home computer generated progress reports, (2) phone home when a student achieves an excellent grade, (3) send out e-mail letters, (4) have coffee on weekends in the shopping centers adjacent to the school or neighborhood, (5) be available during Christmas vacation, or other holidays for group study for tests or student final exams, (6) invite students over to teacher's home on holidays, and (7) perform community service together with students. These are just a few practices found among excellent teachers.

One of the things that teachers pursuing excellence must guard against is "over involvement." Generally, by nature, most teachers are beneficent and vicarious. Many students are naturally drawn to teachers because of this trait. The constant giving of time and energy to students can become consuming and quite fatiguing. We cannot conclude that because a teacher leaves the profession that he or she was not good—or even excellent! Teachers "give themselves away" each day and the energy expenditure is enormous, in the process. The Ancient Greeks had a word for this. They called the emptying process "kenosis." The difference between teacher burnout and kenosis appears to be an inability to refill oneself, due to fatigue and loss of purpose. Excellent teachers somehow have found a way to balance, or "juggle" their personal concerns with their professional ones and expend energy equal to the situations they face. When they are spent, excellent teachers find a way to rediscover purpose and to recharge their personal and educational "batteries." Many of these ways involve colleagues, mentors, activities, church fellowship and families.

Conclusion

Defining "teacher excellence" is a difficult task, whereas, *describing* "excellent teachers" is much less of a labor. Nevertheless, there are some characteristics which help the reader in the direction of both. These are best summarized in the following conceptual framework, which is not intended to be exhaustive.

Excellent secondary teachers come in all shapes and sizes, are male and female, young and not so young, and touch all content areas. There are some key core attributes of teachers classified as "excellent." Excellent teachers are (1) well trained in teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond 2001), (2) have mastery of their content areas (Lemlech 1995), (3) are able to practice and hone their skills in a monitored environment that was overseen by a good master teacher (Lemlech 1995), (4) are able to secure employment and, while on the job, (5) partner with colleagues (Acheson & Gall 1992), (6) develop effective classroom management and discipline skills (Lemlech 1995), (7) develop a genuine care and concern for their students (Coles 1997), (8) continue professional development (Langer 2000), (9) possess consistent and respectable character (Ryan & Bohlin 1999; Lickona 1991), (10) analyze themselves through professional and personal reflection (Acheson & Gall 1992), and (11) give back to the school and community (Langer 2000).

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